Re-thinking the purpose of 'International Schooling': 50 years after Leach

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The significance of Geneva, 2019

The year 2019 had marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Judson Leach's seminal book *International Schools and Their Role in the Field of International Education*. Leach was Head of History at the International School of Geneva when the school released him for a year in 1962 to tour the fledgling field of 'international schooling', to identify the potential market for what went on to become the International Baccalaureate (IB). It was therefore entirely fitting that Bunnell's presentation at the October 2019 Alliance for International Education conference, held at the International School of Geneva, should help to celebrate the anniversary of Leach's book.

In particular, Bunnell's session had focused on Leach's important Chapter 7, where he discussed in some detail his vision of 'The Ideal International School'. However, it is worth dwelling upon Leach's book in its entirety as it presents a landscape of activity that is now barely recognizable. The field that Leach had identified, and discovered from his visits, was a very small, fledgling one. He had listed (see pp.162-165) a total of 372 'International Schools' worldwide, of which 76 were in Asia (including just 15 in the Middle East) educating approximately 80,000 children. The only noticeable areas of activity at that time were all in Northern Europe: Geneva (11 schools); Rome (11); Paris (8); and Vienna (4). Contrast this with the supposedly 11,000 schools operating in 2020, centred around Asia (including the Middle East), China, and India (Gaskell, 2016: Machin, 2017).

Moreover, the field was noticeably amateurish. Leach (1969 p.38) had even said of his school that 'there is too much Swiss influence, too many British staff, too many American students'. Furthermore, Leach (1969 p.38) said the tensions within his school were so great that it offered 'a parody (of) internationalism.' Leach had not mentioned the concept of 'international mindedness' as such, but he implied it important and did assert (p.10) that a school should intend to 'educate young people to be at home in the world anywhere.' He said (p.78) that schools ought to deliver an education that seeks 'solidarity of mankind as an entity in such a way that the one-time international school students will find themselves at home in all cultures and human situations.'

Otherwise, the field as it existed in 1969 now seems remarkably different in almost every way. Leach had also implied that diversity of student and parent population was important, saying that (p.12) 'only when each national, financial and trusteeship interest is in

the minority is it possible to achieve more than a national internationalism.' Contrast this with the fact that in 2020 at least 80% of students are 'local'. Leach had implied that the delivery of an 'international curriculum' was crucial, saying (p.22) that 'the absolute necessity of creating international examinations for a recognized international graduation certificate…without this no school could afford to go all the way with its internationalism.' Contrast this with the fact that in 2020 most 'International Schools' offer a British-based curriculum (and not, for example, the programmes of the IB).

Leach (1969 p.10) had expressed a view that schools ought to be accredited, but needed a degree of freedom to innovate. Further, at a practical level, 'if a too rigid standard were adopted, it would find itself without member schools.' Further, he said (p.176) that: a genuine international school should be an active member of the International Schools Association and should prepare at least those who are academically capable to take the International Baccalaureate.' Contrast this with the current situation where most schools are neither accredited, nor members of any regional or other voluntary association of schools.

Leach expressed a strong view that a non-profit-making company made up of Trustees is most 'appropriate'. He said (p.175) that:

> In most countries a limited non-profit-making company (corporation) is appropriate for safeguarding both the institution and its potential donors. This legal entity should be so constituted that its trustees cannot be dominated by any one government or nationality.'

Contrast this with the fact that most schools in 2020 are profit-driven, and many are operated by branded chains of companies, whilst some are even franchised. Further, Leach said the 'ideal' school would be innovative and prepared to act as an independent, autonomous global laboratory for curriculum and teaching reform. In fact, this was a core theme of his vision, and Bunnell's presentation in Geneva had focused attention on the issue of whether the 'innovative global laboratory' aspect in particular is being 'lost' over time, as the field grows and changes.

Overall, Leach (1969) had pictured a field still in its immature infancy, where relationships and bonds are strong. Schools shared a sense of common purpose, and direction. At the same time, there was only a small division of labour, with schools being accredited and authorised through visits by educators from fellow-schools. In this respect, the scene was quite insular, and almost tribal.

In retrospect, one can see that this was reminiscent of the condition of 'mechanical solidarity', a concept developed in 1893 by Durkheim initially through his studies on suicide, and which became a central feature of his 'Division of Labour Theory', and is now viewed as a key element of his 'Theory of Industrial Society' (Giddens, 1978). 'Mechanical solidarity' represents a rather simple, traditional form of society characterised by loyal, family-style bonds. Here, there is a low level of division of labour, and each player has a strong sense of identity, belonging, and purpose.

The current unease

The sudden and unpredictable shift from a simple, traditional mode of society based upon 'mechanical solidarity' as was being portrayed by Leach (1969), and at the very time by Mayer (1968), towards an advanced 'industrial' one based upon 'organic solidarity' and a high degree of globalised, inter-connected division of labour, will inevitably involve a 'transitionary phase'.

Durkheim had visualised this transition as a problematic one, involving a state of normlessness, or *anomie*, as the previous norms and values of the society begin to break-down and are then slowly replaced, and re-invented (Abrutyn, 2019). One can expect this condition of 'societal disintegration' to cause some unease and concern, and 'precarity' has become a new and unsettling norm (Bunnell, 2015). The players involved will begin to questions their role and purpose, whilst the emergent new norms and values will be equally critically questioned (Su and Wang, 2019).

This is arguably the situation found by the field of 'International Schooling' in 2020. The AIE Conference in Geneva had been titled 'Rethinking International Education – Values and Relevance', and the theme was symptomatic of a bigger picture emerging where the current shifts, trends and developments are causing concerns, dilemmas, and tensions. Indeed, the previous Conference in Amsterdam in October 2017 had addressed similar issues, and the Closing Speech by Terry Haywood in Amsterdam (at www.intedalliance.org) had expressed the view that: 'What we have been doing at all of our conferences for the past 15 years is tracking the development of our educational sector and trying to make sense of what is happening.'

At least one presenter (James Hatch) in Geneva stated in his Abstract that demographic shifts and new business models means that: 'there is no doubt that the International School – both as concept and movement – is undergoing an existential crisis.' The concept of the 'institutional primary task' (Bunnell and Fertig, 2016; Bunnell, Fertig, and James, 2016; and 2017) has recently been raised and theorised, in an attempt to deal with this issue. The current condition does involve some unease, and alternative visions are beginning to appear. One presenter (Richard Eaton) had offered his thoughts in Geneva on the emergence of a 'new' type, 'Illiberal International Schools', which appear outwardly similar to others schools but have been founded and have evolved have to advance national economies, and arguably have an 'institutional primary task' aimed at giving benefits and status to 'illiberal' states.

This is the downside of the emergent condition of 'organic solidarity', with individual schools that are closely tied in terms of existence to nation-building policies and therefore being in turn reliant on the generosity and benevolence of these nation states, which compromises their (previous) autonomous and independent status. At the same time, the links between schools and external accreditation agencies can be used by nation states to give legitimacy to educational practices. The school can be trapped in-between the need to obtain internal authorisation to maintain its survival, and external accreditation to maintain its legitimacy. In this context, the emergent globalised division of labour is becoming complicated, and

problematic. Individual 'International Schools' are now linked to global agencies and forces, undermining the previous independence and 'neutral' positioning of the Schools within society.

One area where this is very noticeable is within the previously externalised and relatively informal accreditation process. Fertig's presentation in Geneva was concerned with the shift from seeing these schools as catering essentially for the children of globally nomadic families to catering largely for those of local wealthy families, which has resulted in an increasing scrutiny by the host-nation of their legitimacy as 'International Schools'. One manifestation of this has been the emergence of government-inspired school inspection of these schools so as to provide evidence of their educational quality, and the degree to which the schools meet 'National' rather than 'International' standards.

An area where this has been very evident is Dubai, arguably the epicentre of 'International Schooling' activity in 2020 yet barely featured on Leach's (1969) radar, where School inspections began in 2008-2009. Now with more than a decade of inspection experience, the *Dubai School Inspection Bureau* inspects private schools in Dubai on an annual basis (Dubai School Inspection Bureau, 2017 p.4), with a key focus to provide 'accurate and reliable evidence of the quality of education in Dubai private schools.' Schools are inspected according to a publicly-available School Inspection Framework, with Schools graded, inspection reports published online, and inspected Schools ranked according to their grading.

Fertig discussed how the inspection grading also has an impact upon whether, and by how much, the School can raise school fees. The emergence of such a range of publically-available information about schools in Dubai plays into the notion of informed customers making evidence-based market choices about schools (Chubb & Moe, 1986; El-Sholkamy & Al-Saleh, 2017; Friedman & Friedman, 1980). A further issue here is related to Leach's notion of the 'ideal' School having the freedom and autonomy to be innovative and experimental. The national inspection process arguably compromises this situation.

Innovation re-visited

Interestingly, and surprisingly, the Conference in Geneva had revealed that the 'global laboratory' aspect stressed as vital by Leach (1969) is still very much alive-and-well. Another presenter in Geneva, Daniel Cowans, had directly addressed 'The role of International Schools in educational innovation'. Cowans had argued the case that 'International Schools' can and should be leaders in innovations. He offered four practical reasons why: their lack of political interference; their size; the make-up of their student body; and the marketing appeal alongside the potential learning gains that can be made by innovating. In short, his presentation (quote below taken from Abstract) offered:

> 'A call for International Schools to recognise that they should hold themselves to higher standards than state schools, and live up to our obligations to innovate, to operate as learning laboratories to serve our function in the wider world of education, and to better prepare our students to be future-ready.'

James Hatch's presentation had also suggested that coinciding with the shifts in scale and nature is an increasing awareness that such schools offer a viable means of enhancing global mindedness and intercultural competencies. Significantly, the Conference revealed that many schools are re-thinking, and re-conceptualising their potential 'laboratory' status. In fact, eight sessions deal with the theme of 'innovation', and at least three revealed 'projects' that are very worthy of raising here. Mary Kelly offered insights into how 'The Thought-full Schools Approach' to professional development gives educators at the International School of Amsterdam (ISA) opportunities to collaboratively explore inquiry-based teaching and learning.

Second, three presenters (Brumpton, Parker, and Stewart) had described how in 2017 the International Schools of London Group (ISL) had embarked on a project within their Research Institute to create an environment where the middle school students could design and complete a collaborative research project at University postgraduate level that would be student-driven. Three teachers at ISL, working in partnership with the University of Edinburgh, devised an approach that aimed to match the skills that are developed during a Masters' course.

Third, Karen Taylor showed that in 2017 the International School of Geneva's Institute of Learning and Teaching, in partnership with several outside organizations, had launched a series of initiatives to develop a space for dialogue among researchers and classroom practitioners, and to create mechanisms to support research action in international schools. Such an approach is termed 'Research Informed Practice in Education' (RIPE).

What is very noticeable about the three individual stories above is the way that schools are making use of collaboration with external agencies to further innovation. In particular, there is evidence of collaboration with Higher Education Institutions. This is the up-side of the inter-related and inter-connected aspect of the emergent 'organic solidarity' mode of activity. However, one should be careful not to over-exaggerate the situation. Careful examination of the schools involved the initiatives described above (in London, Amsterdam, and Geneva) shows that this is still a feature of the 'traditional' model of 'International School', which existed in the 'mechanical solidarity' era described by Leach (1969), and where independence and autonomy is still a key dimension of very-day activity. Further, such schools are not involved in national inspection processes, and are thus still available to express their 'International' identity. Also, the schools involved are still committed to the delivery of an international (Baccalaureate) curriculum, which further aids their 'International' sense of legitimacy.

Concluding remarks

The field of 'International Schooling' has changed substantially since 1969 both in terms of scale and nature (Bunnell, 2014; and 2019) and the role and purpose of such a type of schooling is now much more blurred. Within a sociological lens, we can identify a shift from a traditional, simple mode of activity based upon 'mechanical solidarity' towards a more inter-connected and complex 'organic solidarity'. This shift means the values and relevance of the field have

become problematic and, in some ways, questionable. A condition of 'normlessness' now exists, and it arguably formed the backdrop to the entire AIE Conference in Geneva.

In particular, the growing commercialisation of the field, and the accompanying change in ownership away from an independent, elected board of trustees, has been especially noticeable in moving schools away from what Leach saw as an 'ideal' model. Bunnell's presentation had invited discussion about whether innovation and experimentation, with 'International Schools' acting as independent and idealistic 'global laboratories', is still a valid and achievable purpose. The Conference in Geneva showed that it still is, in some quarters. However, such activity is seemingly largely the preserve of schools that are still tied to a 'traditional' even 'ideal' mode of activity where independence and autonomy is still a feature. Given the rapid changes in nature, one wonders how long this situation can endure?

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